

THE SUCCESS OF THE GOSPEL.*

Whereto then shall I liken the men of this generation? and what are they like?—LUKE VII. 31–35.

CHRIST in the former verses had commended St John's ministry, and in the verse next going afore he speaketh of the different success it found in the publicans, from that it found in the pharisees, who rejected the counsel of God. Now in the verses following he shews what success his own ministry had amongst them, and thus he doth by way of comparison or parable. And this he brings by way of asking a question, which implies admiration* and indignation, both shewing a deep passion, as it is in Isa. : 'What shall I do for my vineyard?' Isa. v. 4; and this shews in general, *that the refractory disposition of man is a matter of indignation and of admiration*, especially if we consider what it despiseth, and whom.

First, *They despise the word of God*, the saving word, the counsel and wisdom of God; nay, secondly, *they despise God clothed in flesh*, that was born and died for their sakes, and thereby offers salvation to them, and life everlasting; yet all this to the obdurate heart of man is as lightning that dazzleth the eyes and helps not the sight a whit; and therefore, Isa. vi. 10, the prophet is bidden 'to make the heart of the people fat.' Go tell this people, hearing they shall not understand, &c.; and therefore no marvel if God bears indignation against such. 'Whereto shall I liken the men of this generation,' Luke vii. 31; this generation of vipers, that are worse than any of the generations fore-passed, by how much they have had more means to be better.

Ver. 32. 'They are like unto children sitting in the market-place, and calling one to another, and saying, We have piped to you, and you have not danced; we have mourned to you, and ye have not wept.'

The comparison is to little children that, at marriages and times for

* 'The Success of the Gospel' forms the third of the four 'Sermons' appended to 'The Saints' Comforts' (See Vol. IV. page 160). The title-page is as follows:—'The Success of the Gospel. Shewing the diverse entertainments it hath in the World. In a Sermon Preached upon the 7. of Luke and 31. verse. By that Faithfull and Reverend Divine, R. Sibbes, D.D. and sometimes Preacher to the Honorable Societie of Grayes-Inne. Printed at London by Tho. Cotes and are to be Sold by Peter Cole. 1637.' It has distinct pagination, but does not appear to have been published by itself.

† That is, 'wonder.'—G.

feasting, piped and danced, and at funerals and times of mourning did mourn and use some fitting ceremony. Now there were some among them that were froward, and would neither be content with mourning nor piping, and playing, and to these Christ compares these great doctors, the scribes and pharisees; a froward generation, neither pleased with Saint John's austere course of life, nor with Christ's affability and meek carriage, and thus he crosseth their proud, froward disposition. For the custom itself, for that it is only related, and no whit censured, therefore I forbear to speak further thereof, but come to the reddition* of the comparison.

Ver. 33. 'For John Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and ye say, he hath a devil.'

Ver. 34. The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and ye say, Behold a gluttonous man, and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!

Where observe *God's gracious dealing with man*. He useth all kind of means, sendeth men of several natures, austere John, and meek Christ, and they use all means to convince the judgment, all methods to work upon the memories, all reasons to work upon the affections and wills. He turns himself into all shapes to gain wretched man unto him.

Secondly, Observe *the order God useth*; first, John, then Christ. John prepares the way, throwing down hills: 'O ye generation of vipers,' Mat. iii. 7. Oh, say they, this man is too harsh, I think he hath a devil. Then Christ comes with blessed: 'Blessed are the poor, blessed are you that weep,' &c., Mat. v. 3, *seq.* So he sent the law first, then the gospel; first he threatens, then promises.

Thirdly, Observe that *the manner of their teaching is double, by doctrine and life, and these agree*, wherein observe it is good that life and doctrine should suit; for John's life was austere and retired, his doctrine was also tending to beat down the proud conceits of man. Christ came to all, conversed with all meekly and lovingly; and the reason of God's making use of men of severe dispositions is, because of the different natures of men, whereof some can better relish one nature than another. Some love the hot and fiery nature, others delight in the meek spirit; and though there be diversity of gifts, yet they come from the same Spirit. Even as the diverse smells of flowers comes from the same influence, and the diverse sounds in the organs comes from the same breath, so doth the Spirit diffuse itself diversely, as it meets with diverse natures. Yet all tendeth to the perfecting of one work. We may hence therefore gather, that to converse fruitfully and lovingly is to be preferred before austerity, and commendable above it, because it is the conversation of Christ himself.

And the papists shall never be able to prove their foolish austere vows of a solitary life, &c., to be preferred before communication and society, unless they will prove John better than Christ. And again, this should teach us to moderate our censures of the diverse natures and carriage of men, as knowing that God in wisdom hath appointed it for excellent use, and that all agree in the building up of the spiritual temple of the church.

In the next place, observe that *where grace doth not overpower nature, no means will prevail* over the obdurate nature of man. Neither John nor Christ could work anything upon these Pharisees. Thus was it in the wilderness and Egypt. What admirable wonders did God work, yet how incredulous and stiff-necked were they! And the reason is, God gave not a heart, and in the conversion of a sinner *there must be another manner of*

* That is, 'rendering,' or application.—G.

grace than only offering and exhortation to accept of Christ; nay, the Spirit itself must do more than exhort, for it may lay open to us many motives, tell us of God's goodness, truth, and strength sealed to us; it may tell us of wrath and judgment, and on the other side of kingdoms, everlasting joys, perfection of happiness, yet all not work any remorse in the heart of man if the Spirit leaves him there. And the reason is, man is dead in sin by nature, and that 'strong man' having gotten the possession, cannot be cast out but by the 'stronger man,' which must quicken and give power, that may change every part of the soul, the understanding, will, and affections, else all means is to no purpose but for to make us unexcusable at the day of judgment. Hence therefore we may see the shallowness of those that conceive of the word of God, as if it did only persuade the will. No; it must alter the will and change it quite, else arguments are to no purpose; and in the second place, it teacheth us to come to the ordinances with holy hearts, begging God's power to soften our hard and stony hearts, and desiring him to join the powerful work of his Holy Spirit with the outward means, and that his word may be like to that word at the beginning, that no sooner commanded light, but 'there was light.'

And lastly, it teacheth us to *conceive of the word, together with the goodness and power thereof, with admiration and wonderment.*

In the next place, observe, from the calumny of the scribes, *that rebellion and opposition against goodness is never without show of reason; and men they will never go to hell, but they have reason for it. They will countenance rebellion by defaming and scandalising the people of God; and to that end they will be sure to take things with a strong hand. Austere John 'hath a devil;' sociable Christ 'is a wine-bibber.'*

And the reason is, *the pride of man, that will not be thought so foolish as to speak, or do anything without reason, and therefore when it is wanting they will feign one. In every calumny they do so, and the calumny and scandal here was the greater, because it was raised by the scribes and pharisees, the great doctors and the wise rabbis, whose word must carry such credit with it, as alone to condemn Christ: 'We would not have brought him to thee were he not worthy of death,' Mat. xxvi. 66; and whose life must be a rule to others: 'Doth any of the pharisees believe in him,' John vii. 48.*

For use therefore of this doctrine, *let us account it no strange matter if we be traduced, disgraced, and scandalised, for it was Christ's and John's lot. Great slanders must be maintained from great men, such as them that sit in Moses's chair, the pharisees and scribes. John's holiness should have procured reverence, and Christ's sociableness should have been rewarded with love; but it is the lot of them and all Christians: 'The disciple is not above his master,' Mat. x. 24. They may do well, but must look to hear ill. Wicked men when they learn to think well, they will learn to report well.*

Let us grieve at their estate, and comfort ourselves in Christ, who will maintain our cause.

Thirdly, *Be innocent as doves, and be ever doing good, that our lives may give them the lie, and stop others from giving credit to their malicious aspersions.*

Fourthly, *Let us look that we approve ourselves to God, who shall judge us. Stand or fall to him, and pass* not for the judgment of man, and of such as shall be judged themselves.*

* Cf. Glossary, *sub voce*.—G.

5 Lastly, *Let us take heed we take not a thing in the wrong sense* and of vain prejudice. Men are witty* to lay stumbling-blocks in their own way to heaven. This preacher is too strict, that too mild; this too plain, that too poor. Like the children Christ speaks of here, nothing will please them: hence, in the last place, we may learn from the example of Christ, that it is not ill to speak ill of ill men, in case of apology and prevention of scandal; for Christ's example doth warrant it. But to proceed.

Ver. 35, 'But wisdom is justified of all her children.'

From the connection of these words with the former, by this word 'but,' we may observe, that *is is the lot of God's truth to have diverse entertainments in this world*. Some will be children of wisdom, and justify it; others, as the Pharisees, will scandalise it; and the reason is, *from the diversity of men's natures* in this world, wherein are contrary seeds† and contrary servants to contrary kingdoms. Some will flock after Christ; others will say, 'he deceiveth the people,' John vii. 12. Yet as there is 'a generation of vipers,' so there is a generation of children belonging to the kingdom, that swim against the stream, like the stars that have a retrograde motion to the residue. But for the meaning of the words, by 'wisdom' here is meant the doctrine of the gospel, not only as it is in books, but as it is in the ministry. And briefly the ways of God laid out in his ordinances, and taught by weak men, all this is understood in this word 'wisdom,' and this word 'justified,' that is approved and received 'of her children,' that is, of her followers, being such as wisdom begets to a new life. In these words let us consider, first, *that there is a doctrine which is wisdom*; and this teacheth what God intends to us, and we should return unto him. This reason will evince that God being so good unto man, he should have some thanks at his hands, and some acknowledgment of duty to him, by way of worship, which it is most fit God himself should institute; and the rule hereof, joined with practice, is that wisdom here meant, for there is diverse wisdoms: first, *as it is in God*, and so it is a depth unsearchable. 'Man knoweth not the price hereof,' Job xxviii. 13. Secondly, there is a wisdom *communicated to Christ*, who hath a twofold wisdom, infinite as God, and finite as man; and a wisdom as he is God and man joined together; and this is called wisdom of union. In the next place, there is a wisdom of *vision*, and this the saints and angels have in heaven, and we shall have hereafter; and there is a wisdom of *revelation*, which is revealed in the Scripture to us by the Spirit, and this is the wisdom meant in this place, as it is comprehended either in principles laid down in the gospel, or in conclusions inferred necessarily from them, or in our improvement of them, to the right and best end, which is God's glory and our salvation. This is wisdom; and called so here by way of emphasis, shewing it is the only excellent wisdom, which will further appear in these respects.

1. First, *It doth arise from a higher beginning than all other wisdom* whatever; for it comes from God's goodness and mercy.

2. Secondly, *The matter. It is a deep mystery*. Christ, God-man; his nature, offices, and benefits.

3. Thirdly, *It is more powerful* than all other wisdom; for it transforms us. It makes us wise, and changes us from wicked, and makes us good.

4. Fourthly, *It is better than the law*, which was a killing letter. This gives life.

5. Furthermore, this wisdom *is everlasting*, and it is ancientest: intended before the world was. It is also *inviolable*. God will change the course of

* That is, 'wise' = ingenious.—G.

† Cf. Isa. lxxv. 23, with i. 4.—G.

nature for his church's sake ; and sooner will he break covenant with the day and night than this covenant, which shall be for ever, Ps. xix. 9.

6. The end of it is *to bring us home to God*, 1 John i. 3.

This wisdom hath the same *name with Christ*, who is the Wisdom of the Father. He gives his power to the word ; and what reproach is done to it, he accounts it as done to himself.

Use 1. This serves, therefore, *to convince the atheists*, who cannot choose but acknowledge there is a God, that it is fit the creatures should depend upon him, and shew it by way of service ; and that this service should be prescribed by God rather than by man. Let them know this is the wisdom and the word of God. No word like it in the convincing power it hath in purity and holiness ; none so powerful to transform us from death to life, from nature unto grace.

Use 2. Secondly, it serves *to exhort us all to attend upon the commands of this wisdom*. Men are admired for their deep wisdom in policy, whereby they come to be great. This without grace is enmity to God ; and the devil dwells in the heads of such as makes honours, ambition, or pleasures their sole aim. The wisdom of arts and sciences goes beyond that, yet comes far short of this ; that being but temporary, and perishing with the things themselves, but this everlasting and eternal ; and indeed policy and civil learning at the most do but civilize and make men morally wise ; to which, if nothing else be adjoined, the life of such is but a smooth passage to hell.

Use 3. Lastly, this should teach us *to consider, magnify, and admire* at God's goodness*, that hath given such a wisdom to us as this, to be a lantern to light our way in this dark world, and to be as manna to feed us, that we faint not in the way, till we attain to everlasting life.

The second general thing is, that *there are children of wisdom, and that the world† it is fruitful and able to beget* ; for it hath the Spirit of God accompanying it, which is fruitful. We see the sun and the rain beget herbs ; trades makes men tradesmen, and arts artists ; and shall we not think this wisdom should make men wise, and this trade make a man fitting for work ? Yes, verily. No wisdom hath this begetting and operative spirit but this ; for the law finds us dead, and leaves us dead. Again, this wisdom is the arm of God to salvation. By it 'we are begotten to be sons of God ;' by it we are children 'made like to God,' holy, pure, heavenly, begotten to his image ; and therefore as children we ought 'to obey the word' in performance of all duties ; of prayer, hearing, reading. Furthermore, in that *we are scholars in Christ's school, which is wisdom itself*, we may be said to be 'sons of wisdom,' as those were called the sons of the prophets that were disciples to them. Now our teacher is a mighty teacher. It is no matter for the dulness of the scholar, this teacher can put wit and capacity where none was formerly, Ps. cxix. 12. Moreover, if this were not thus, then it would come to pass, that there should be a time when there would be no church ; that Christ should be a king without subjects, and likewise a doctor without scholars.

1. From the doctrine we may observe, therefore, that those that follow the best rule, which is God's word, and intend the best end, which is their own salvation, *these are the most wise*, for they provide for the worst times, as the ant for winter ; and with the wise steward they provide themselves of friends, and like Joseph they lay up for dear years. These are wise that procure shelter for themselves against all dangers, and are fruitful in doing good.

* That is, 'wonder.'—G.

† Qu. 'word'?—Ed.

2. And, in the second place, let this *persuade us to attend upon wisdom*, be we who we will be, a publican, an extortioner, a persecuting Saul. This wisdom will 'of stones raise children up unto Abraham,' Mat. iii. 9.

3. In the next place, observe *the children of wisdom do justify it*; that is, they receive it, approve it, defend it, maintain it; for it is fitting that children should stand for their mother, and take to heart any wrong that is done to her; and therefore the child of wisdom privately believes it, and loves it; and openly, if the truth or any ordinance of God or holiness of life be spoken against, he will defend and maintain it, yea, to the death; for wisdom, though with the loss of all things, is rich enough. So Moses esteemed the rebukes of Christ more than the pleasures of a king's court, Heb. xi. 25.

Quest. But must we maintain it, so as to speak for it always, and in all companies?

Ans. I answer, No, but when we are called to it. Wisdom dwells with the prudent; and where it is, it will teach when to speak, and what, and in what manner. And the reasons of this observation are, first, it is fitting *that God's children should concur in judgment with God*, who justifies his wisdom in his children, and admires his graces in them, 'O woman, great is thy faith,' Mat. xv. 38; as contrarily he doth admire the stubbornness of the heart of wicked men. Secondly, *wisdom in itself is justifiable*; for it justifies itself; for it carries a justifying spirit with it. It hath a power able to change. In all estates it justifies itself; in trouble and anguish it comforts. Yea, in death, when all other wisdom perisheth, this raiseth up. It is powerful above the power of nature. It pulls down the proud heart of man in prosperity.

Quest. But it may be said, if it be thus, what need is there that the children of wisdom should justify it?

Ans. I answer, in respect of itself, it needs not our help to justify it; but in regard of others, to draw them on to the loving and embracing thereof, and in respect of ourselves, to manifest the truth of grace in us.

The church also justifies it by proposing it, and declaring the goodness thereof by defending it and commending it. Yet is it not above the Scriptures, no more than we are above the truth of God, when we are said to 'seal it.' Children we are of the truth, and desire to be ruled by it, not to judge it, and all children agree herein to justify it, as it is said here, 'Wisdom is justified of all her children.' Though there be of divers countries, of divers nations and natures, yet all agree in commending and embracing this wisdom; and thereby are they known to be children of wisdom, for hereby *may we know what estate we are in, even by our carriage of ourselves towards wisdom*. How many, professing to be the children of wisdom, do notwithstanding condemn it. Diverse abroad, whom wisdom shall not judge, but they will judge wisdom, and are indeed the children of human tradition. And among ourselves, *are there not many that reject the ordinance of God?* Is not, say they, reading of good books at home as good as going to church? Do not such confess that the rivers of Damascus are as good as Jordan; whenas, if ever we come from this spiritual Egypt into the land of promise, we must go over this Jordan. We must come to heaven by the foolishness of preaching.

Again, are there not many, *because they see there is diversities of religions, they will be of none*, till it be decided which is the truth, and this is the way to die in no religion. These are bastards. They cannot be children of wisdom, for they know it not; as likewise they are such that justify

ignorance, making it the mother of devotion (a). They profess they are the children of ignorance and error, and not of wisdom. Another sort there are that *in word justify wisdom*, saying it is the word of God, *but in their life and conversation do deny it*. Let such know, he that lives against the faith shall be damned, as well as he that believes against it. Good meat is commended more by eating and cheering than by talking. If such did truly believe the wisdom of God, it would purify them; and not to believe is madness; but to live so as if they believed not is desperate madness. The sinner denies God's presence, the covetous man denies God's providence, the despairing man denies God's mercy and Christ's merits, the sinner against conscience denies God's justice, else the terror of the Lord would move him. Yet if we see these things in us, and allow not of them, but condemn ourselves for them, God will be merciful and spare us.

This should encourage us, in the next place, *to proceed on in a resolute course of Christianity*. What though the wicked world laugh at us, and scorn us, God the Judge justifies us, his children justify us. As for other men, the Scripture calls them fools, for God hath given them over to a reprobate judgment in things that concern a godly life, and therefore if we be censured by such, let us account it our crown.

Moreover, this is a ground of exhortation, *to move us to this duty of justifying the ordinances and ways of God in life and conversation*. Justify Christ to be our Saviour by relying on him, and let the justified soul justify him to the world by repairing to him and depending on him. Justify God to be our Father, by repairing to him in all estates. Justify truth to be the best riches, by esteeming all other wisdoms dross and dung in comparison; and let us admire the goodness of wisdom, else wisdom will not lodge with us. Let it rule in our hearts, and it will abide with us; else it is a stranger, and will not tarry. In our days the voice of wisdom is heard. It uses all means. It hath sent men of all manner of conversations and gifts. Of all others, we are inexcusable if we entertain it not, and justify it not in our lives and conversations.

But it will be asked, How shall we justify wisdom?

I answer, *Let us strive first to empty ourselves and souls of corruption*. As a vessel full of bad liquor must be emptied before good can be put in, so we by nature are full of folly, and must empty ourselves before we can be enabled to justify wisdom; and in what proportion this folly is overruled in us, in the same proportion do we justify wisdom; for where wisdom is, it must dwell largely and purely; for itself is pure, and will endure no mixture. And therefore those that justify themselves in any ill course cannot justify wisdom; for when it once comes to cross him in his beloved course, let his words be never so good, his folly will discover itself. 'How can you believe, when you seek for glory one of another?' saith Christ, John v. 44.

Secondly, *Beg of God that he would take away the veil of our hearts, that we may know and love the best things in the best manner*; that he would open to us the wonders of his law.

Thirdly, *Labour that all our knowledge may be spiritual*, for if it be acquired out of books, and not written in our hearts, in time of temptation we shall never justify wisdom. This is evident out of the history of the martyrs. Many illiterate men stood out stiffly for the truth, and justified it with their blood, when many great clerks* gave over their profession; for when the Spirit teaches, it teaches to obey, to want, to abound, and to despise the

* That is, 'learned men.'—G.

glory of the world. Spiritual wisdom brings humility, other wisdom puffs men up with pride.

Fourthly, Therefore we should *pray for the Spirit of God*, that it would settle and seal truths into our hearts, and teach us to obey and practise the things it enjoins us.

Fifthly, We should also *condemn ourselves, and grow poor in spirit*; for what justifying is there like to that of those that, being abased by outward afflictions, are likewise inwardly humbled; so, condemning themselves, they justify God's wisdom; and therefore those that either trust to intercession of saints or their merits, in vain they think ever to come to the performance of this duty.

Sixthly, *Attend we on wisdom*; for what is more excellent than it, and without it all are fools. Wise they may be for the world to get riches, while their end is condemnation and perpetual beggary in hell. Many are wise to get high places here, and witty* to get a deep place in hell. They study for wisdom in the creatures, and when they die, their wisdom perisheth with them, and they want that true wisdom that should support them in death.

Seventhly, *And endeavour we to be rooted in it*, that we may be able to speak out of the power thereof in our souls, and to resist the temptations of Satan, with sound resolutions against them; and then when that day of revelation of all things shall come, Christ will own us, and justify us, when the children of this world shall tremble to hear that truth and wisdom condemn them perpetually, which here they hated and slandered.

Lastly, In all our wants and distresses, *so carry we ourselves that we may shew we have a Father to provide, a King to defend us in our desertions*, that we have a Priest in heaven to make our peace, and in all temptations that we have a Prophet that will direct us in the right way unto heaven, in spite of the malice of hell itself.

* That is, 'wise,' = ingenious.—G.

NOTE.

(a) P. 286.—'Ignorance . . . the mother of devotion.' This subsequently famous or infamous phrase was perhaps first used by Dr Cole in the great Disputation held at Westminster. Cole was an out-and-out defender of Popery. G.